

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Oil spill impacts mountain species

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

The Deep Horizon oil spill continues to make headlines as oil keeps pouring into the Gulf of Mexico and the slick spreads. In a glimmer of good news, the Fish & Wildlife Service recently reported that the first two oiled birds found in the oil spill, a northern gannet and a brown pelican, were cleaned and released at Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, safely on the east coast of Florida.

Clearly everyone recognizes the tremendous environmental catastrophe unfolding, however what may be less obvious is the wildlife impacts we'll have here in the mountains. Each spring millions of migratory birds including songbirds like warblers, tanagers, and vireos, pass through the southern Appalachians, travelling from Central and South America on their way to northern breeding grounds. One of the great trials of the journey is crossing the Gulf of Mexico – a long stretch with no food and no rest except for the occasionally ship or oil rig.

Though these birds have to contend with oil fumes as they fly over the spill, the biggest threat will come when the oil makes landfall. The flight across the gulf taxes these birds immensely, and they reach our gulf shores land famished and exhausted. This stands to cause a problem when the beach a warbler might light upon for a few moments is covered with oil. Or when coastal marshes become contaminated and the insects the birds are counting on as food begin dying.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.